

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit to St. Agnes Parish, Hillsboro (Sat., 6:00 PM and Sunday, 10:30 AM), and Holy Family Parish, Litchfield (Sunday, 8:30 AM)
3rd Sunday of Easter – Year B**

April 13-14, 2024

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As your Bishop, it is good to be with you this weekend for my Parish Pastoral Visit to the Parishes of Saint Agnes in Hillsboro and Holy Family in Litchfield.

It was a blessing for me to celebrate the 4:00 o'clock Mass today/yesterday at Holy Family Church in Litchfield, at which I administered the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion to fourteen young people from Holy Family and Saint Agnes Parishes. I am also celebrating the Masses on Saturday evening at 6:00 o'clock at Saint Agnes Church, Sunday at 8:30 at Holy Family Church, and Sunday at 10:30 at Saint Agnes Church. To complete my parish pastoral visit, I will return on Sunday, April 28, to meet with your parish councils in Hillsboro to hear about all the good things that are happening here at your parishes to implement our Fourth Diocesan Synod.

My visit this weekend is also an opportunity to share with you my hopes and my vision as your bishop for the future of our diocese, building on and implementing our Diocesan Synod held in 2017 on the theme of discipleship and stewardship.

Following our Diocesan Synod, I published my third pastoral letter, *Ars vivendi et moriendi in Dei gratia*, Latin for, “The Art of Living and Dying in God’s Grace,” I provided a summary of the Fourth Diocesan Synod and some pastoral commentary on the twelve declarations that were adopted. I also offered some theological reflections on the art of living and dying in God’s grace.

Last Fall at our Convocation of Priests, we reviewed how we have done over the past six years in implementing the twelve declarations that were adopted at our Diocesan Synod in 2017. I was pleased to report that we have made significant progress in putting into effect the steps needed to achieve the goals of most of the twelve declarations. For example, Declaration 6 called for the Sacraments of Christian Initiation to be offered in the proper sequence (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) for children at about the age of reason, which normally will be in the third grade of elementary school. We refer to this as the “restored order” for the Sacraments of Christian Initiation because this order – Baptism,

Confirmation and then Eucharist – was the order for receiving these sacrament for 1900 years. It was not until about 100 years ago that Pope Pius X lowered the age for First Communion, but since he did not address lowering the age for Confirmation, the order was inverted to give children First Communion before Confirmation. So we are now going back to the order of receiving the sacraments that the Church observed for 1900 years and still does for adults.

The other reason for doing this flows from our Diocesan Synod, which was to promote discipleship and stewardship as a way of life from an early age. The concern was that too many children stopped going to church after being confirmed in eighth grade. Before I celebrate the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion, I send the candidates a questionnaire asking what receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation means to them. One student actually answered, “It means I graduate from the *Church!*” Unfortunately, that is the way too many students treated the reception of Confirmation. Pope Francis has even called Confirmation the “Sacrament of Farewell”!¹

I have heard that some parents have stopped sending their children to Catholic schools or parish schools of religion after third grade. In such cases, they really do not understand the purpose of religious education. It

is not just to prepare them for receiving the sacraments, as important as that is, but essentially to teach them how to be disciples of Jesus Christ, that is, how live as Christians for the rest of their lives. The answer is not to move Confirmation back to eighth grade. Keeping them for another five years after which they stop going to church is not the goal. The goal is to keep them as active participating Catholics for the rest of their lives!

Although not part of the synodal declarations, we have also been celebrating these Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion at our Cathedral in Springfield (except when I come to a parish for a pastoral visit), as a visible sign that they are being initiated into the Catholic Church, that is, the universal Church throughout the world, and not just their local parish.

One of the declarations that we have not done so well in implementing is Declaration 11, which calls for “striving to fulfill the Biblical command to tithe,” that is, giving 10% of our income to God by donating the suggested amount of at least 8% of our income to our parishes and 2% to other charities as an expression of their gratitude to God and of their stewardship of His manifold gifts of creation.

I know that priests are reluctant to talk about money, but the Gospels tell us that Jesus actually talked about money quite a bit, not as a

fundraiser asking for donations, but on the proper use of money. On the other hand, Protestant pastors do not seem to be reluctant to talk about tithing and expect the members of their congregations to do so. They are not bashful to talk about tithing because it is a concept found in the Bible.

The first Scriptural reference is found in the Book of Genesis.² Before God makes his covenant with Abram and changes his name to Abraham, Abram is returning from a victorious battle and stops to give the priest Melchizedek a “tenth of everything” that he had won in victory. Notice that Abram does not ask Melchizedek how much he needs or how his donation will be used. Nor was Abram’s tithe made prior to going to battle as a way of trying to win favor with God. Abram gives his gift in gratitude for what God has given to him. We, too, are called to be generous in giving to the Church as a way of showing our gratitude to God for all that He has given to us.

A national study in 2003 showed that Protestants typically give 2.6% of their income to their local churches, while Catholics give 1.2%.³ So we have quite a way to go to reach this goal of giving 10% to God!

In this pastoral letter, I said that the “art of living and dying in God’s grace is the key to everlasting happiness in eternal life. The Christian faithful die to sin through the saving waters of baptism. By dying to their

selfish desires through acts of mortification and self-sacrifice, the Christian faithful grow in love of God and neighbor. The whole Christian life aims at reaching this goal of everlasting happiness in eternal life by turning from sin and growing in virtue through God's grace."

As an expression of how to reach this goal of everlasting happiness, we adopted a new mission statement at our Fourth Diocesan Synod for all of us as members of this Diocese. It says, "The mission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is to build a fervent community of intentional and dedicated missionary disciples of the Risen Lord and steadfast stewards of God's creation who seek to become saints. Accordingly, the community of Catholic faithful in this diocese is committed to the discipleship and stewardship way of life as commanded by Christ Our Savior and as revealed by Sacred Scripture and Tradition."

To further this mission, the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is committed to implementing the Four Pillars of Discipleship and Stewardship, namely, hospitality, prayer, formation and service. In other words, we will invite people proactively to join us in prayer, especially Sunday Mass; we will provide well-prepared celebrations of the sacraments and other occasions for prayer as signs of hope and paths of grace to heaven; we will study the Bible and learn more about Jesus and

our Catholic faith; and we will serve each other, especially those in need, by practicing charity and justice.

Through prayer, discernment, and consultation with others, it has become evident that the Lord is inviting us to embrace more fully our call to discipleship out of which necessarily follows a life of stewardship.⁴

My brothers and sisters in Christ: The Gospel readings for the Second and Third Sundays of Easter tell us that when our Risen Lord appeared to His disciples, His message to them was, "Peace be with you." Last week, on the Second Sunday of Easter, the Gospel according to Saint John told us that the disciples were behind locked doors because they were afraid. Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you." Thomas the Apostle was not with the others on that occasion, but a week later his disciples were again inside and this time Thomas was with them. Once again, Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you" (Jn 20:19-31).

Today, on the Third Sunday of Easter, the Gospel according to Saint Luke tells us that the Risen Lord appeared to the disciples, stood in their midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you" (Lk 24:35-48).

In light of this greeting of peace that our Risen Lord repeatedly proclaims, it is good to recall Saint Luke's description of the announcement of the birth of Jesus, when the angels proclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to those on whom His favor rests" (Luke 2:14). Indeed, this proclamation of peace on earth that we hear at Christmastime is fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ that we celebrate during the Easter season. While secular culture gives more attention to Christmas, the more important celebration from a religious perspective is Easter, since Christmas would merely be the birthday of a great man if He had not risen from the dead. Christmas gains its glory from the fact that its true significance is fulfilled in the resurrection of Our Savior, the Prince of Peace.

"Peace" is a beautiful word, but what does it really mean? The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965, said, "Peace is not merely the absence of war; nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between

enemies; nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called an enterprise of justice. Peace results from that order structured into human society by its divine Founder, and actualized by men as they thirst after ever greater justice. . . . This peace on earth cannot be obtained unless personal well-being is safeguarded and men freely and trustingly share with one another the riches of their inner spirits and their talents. A firm determination to respect other men and peoples and their dignity, as well as the studied practice of brotherhood are absolutely necessary for the establishment of peace. Hence peace is likewise the fruit of love, which goes beyond what justice can provide. That earthly peace which arises from love of neighbor symbolizes and results from the peace of Christ which radiates from God the Father. For by the cross the incarnate Son, the prince of peace reconciled all men with God" (GS 78).

The Twentieth Century was ravaged by two World Wars. Our nation was also involved in wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. With all the scientific and technological advances that now surround us, it would not have been unreasonable to have hoped that the Twenty-first Century would move people beyond the barbarities of war to a more civilized world. Sadly, however, the wars currently raging between Russia and Ukraine as well as between Hamas and Israel in Gaza

are stark and gruesome reminders that true peace remains painfully elusive.

A cease-fire or truce in these wars would not be true peace, which is the ultimate goal. A temporary cessation of violence and the silencing of weapons will not bring about real peace as long as hatreds and hostilities remain between enemies.

The kingdom of God is a place of peace, and Jesus invites the disciples into that place. Like the first disciples, our mission as Christians sends us out into the world to spread the Good News of Christ's peace. It is belief in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus that leads to the building up of a community that lives in peace because it shares one mind and one heart.

I concluded my third pastoral letter by telling a personal anecdote, which I would like to share with you now to close this homily.

Once when I was catching a flight to celebrate an out-of-town wedding for a friend of mine, I had gift-wrapped a figurine of the Blessed Mother as a wedding present for the newlyweds and put the gift in my carry-on bag. When I got to the airport and put my bag on the conveyer belt for security screening, the TSA agent looked at the x-ray of my bag and called out, "Bag check." I immediately realized the problem: the

figurine was made of leaded crystal and the security agent must have thought it was some sort of weapon. The TSA supervisor came over, saw me standing there wearing my clerical suit and Roman collar, then looked at the x-ray image of the figurine and exclaimed, "For heaven's sake, it's the Blessed Mother, let him through!" Of course, I was greatly relieved. While this incident makes us laugh, it is a true story, and the words of the TSA supervisor are an exact quote. Reflecting on it, I have often thought that this little vignette is exactly the scenario I hope for when I die: I pray that I will arrive at the gates of heaven with the Blessed Mother at my side. Seeing me standing there with Our Lady beside me, Saint Peter will exclaim, "For heaven's sake, he's with the Blessed Mother, let him through!"

Staying close to our Blessed Mother throughout life provides faithful assurance that she will lead us to her Son Jesus at the hour of our death, so that we may die in God's grace and enjoy everlasting happiness in eternal life.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope Francis, Pastoral Visit to Cagliari – Meeting with Young People, September 22, 2013; https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130922_giovani-cagliari.html

² “Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine. He was a priest of God Most High. He blessed Abram with these words: ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, the creator of heaven and earth; And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your foes into your hand.’ Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything” (Genesis 14:18-20).

³ Father Kenneth Doyle, “Protestants, Catholics and tithing,” Catholic News Service, June 2, 2022; <https://evdiomessage.org/protestants-catholics-and-tithing/>.

⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, 1992, p. 8; <http://www.usccb.org/upload/stewardship-disciples-response-10th-anniversary.pdf>.